A blue-green approach to sorting through occupational hazards in the recycling industry

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“People don’t know about the important work that we do to help the environment. In the past we’ve been mostly quiet, but that’s changing now because we’re speaking up and organizing.” - Alejandra León, sorter at Waste Management’s recycling facility in San Leandro, CA

Workers in the recycling industry are exposed to numerous occupational health and safety hazards. Traffic accidents and confined spaces have led to tragic fatalities in California, but these are only the more publicized cases as of late. Among the other frequent and serious risks are ergonomic, chemical and biological hazards, blood-borne pathogens, slips, trips, falls, and noise. The workforce is exceptionally vulnerable, predominantly Latino, low-wage, and with little formal education. This industry attracts a diverse and powerful set of interests from both labor and environmental communities. It represents a “green job” crucial to community "zero waste" policies and is a growing source of local employment.

The Labor Occupational Health Program collaborated with International Longshore and Warehouse Union, Local 6 to develop a training program for workers in recycling facilities in Alameda County. The partnership was established at a strategic time. Contract negotiations are taking place at all facilities, and the union aims to increase workers’ wages from $9 - $12/hour to the $20/hour rate being paid in neighboring counties. They also aim to address health and safety hazards and develop worker leaders. Since the City of Oakland is in the process of selecting a recycling company to manage the curbside residential pick-up, the union seeks to establish standards that can be encouraged or required through the city contracts process. An active community coalition was also formed to support this program, and includes faith-based, immigrant rights, occupational safety advocacy, legal, environmental, and other labor groups.
In order to address the issue of hazardous work conditions, our partnership adopted an approach that not only builds individual health and safety capacity among workers, but also simultaneously addresses the broader context through policy solutions and community involvement. As reported by ILWU 6, this program boosted the organizing campaign’s momentum by increasing worker confidence and skills. This was evidenced most dramatically by impromptu work stoppages initiated by trained workers in response to safety issues.

As a result of this training program and community alliance:

- Industry-specific training materials in English and Spanish (Worker Safety in Recycling Facilities/Seguridad para los trabajadores en las plantas de reciclaje) were developed. The associated training covered the following topics:
  - Hazards in the recycling industry
  - Focus on three types of hazards: airborne hazards, ergonomics and needles and other materials with blood. The aim is to increase understanding of where these hazards are found in recycling facilities, how they affect workers and how to address them to make the workplace safer
  - Workers’ rights, how to file a complaint with Cal/OSHA and taking action to address health and safety problems.

- Trained workers conducted multiple work stoppages at two recycling facilities in response unabated hazards (e.g., immediately stopping the conveyor belt when spotting syringes and asbestos, protesting a broken ladder, rat infestation). While company procedures state that workers are to stop the line if they see needles, these appear quite frequently and there is pressure to not stop the line and cause delays. ILWU reports that the trainings have encouraged workers to have the courage to take these steps.

- ILWU filed a Cal/OSHA complaint.

- Constructive response by management to work stoppages (hazard abatement).

- ILWU 6 reported increased overall worker confidence and organizing activity among trained workers.

- 146 union recycling workers received 4 hours of OSH training

- 19 non-union recycling workers received 2 hours of OSH training

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